

Joan Jett and the Blackhearts

By Danny McCue

Joan Jett has never sought to reinvent rock and roll, she's only sought to live it, and come to think of it, maybe the word 'sought' doesn't even belong in that sentence. To be Joan Jett on stage before a paying audience or on record, rock and roll is the only thing that matters.

I met Joan recently at a Chinese restaurant in Manhattan, she ate ribs, I sipped at some water, and I have to say that as a reporter I was somewhat disconcerted, back when I bought *Bad Reputation* eight years ago, I never thought I'd be sitting in the same room as her, let alone making attempts at some kind of polite dinner conversation, geez, this is a cool beat to cover!

Released earlier this year, *Up Your Alley*, may very well be the best album Jett has produced over the course of her 16 year career. Tense, funny, raucous, and pure, *Alley* is the fullest exploration of her talent since "I Love Rock and Roll" defined the vision of what her subsequent career was going to be all about. "I Love Rock and Roll" wasn't just a declaration of unconditional love, it was a gauntlet thrown down in the face of increasingly static regimentation by the radio and record industry. It brought her her widest recognition to date.

Up Your Alley relishes the battles won and the fight yet to be waged. Cinematic and visceral, through such songs as "I Hate Myself for Loving You," "Riding with James Dean," and Chuck Berry's "Tulane," Jett communicates her message fluently and effectively: it's time to rock and roll again. Carve it in stone with the prose of electric guitar.



UP HER ALLEY

Interview

DM: I've always found the sound on your records to be very pure, the whole idea of a two guitar, bass, and drums line-up is a very pure, vintage, most would argue quintessential way to do what you're doing, but at the same time it makes the chemistry and contributions of each member that much more critical; how do you preserve the essence of what the Blackhearts are about when the guys in the band change?

JJ: Well, this band has been together for the last three albums, since 1986, and if come and see the band, you'll see that the theme is the same. It's unabashed fun music. The essence, whatever it is, I think, is stronger now than it ever was because the guys in the band are great musicians and they really believe in it. You know, this is one of the few bands that plays the kind of music we play and we're good at it, and it's a good feeling knowing that you're one of the few bands out there in your style that goes out there and really puts three-hundred percent into it. It's exciting, and that's the essence of good rock and roll.

DM: Is there any major reason why you haven't played the Island in such a long time?

JJ: I think it's just a matter of being able to find the right place to play. Y'know, you don't like to say that one place is anymore special than another, but when it's your hometown, you'd be lying if you didn't say that; New York is special, it's intense, scary, nervewracking, and it's got to be right. It's got to be the right thing, the right venue. Right now, we just have to wait and see because we don't know how we're going to do with this record, that's the barometer as to what we're going to be able to do.

DM: "Roadrunner," the single off of *Good Music*, received a lot of airplay on local radio stations and was a fairly big hit for you, yet the album didn't really take off. What were your objectives upon entering the studio to record *Up Your Alley*?

JJ: I wanted to go back to the simplicity of "Touch Me" and "I Love Rock and Roll," it's still what we know how to do best and something which we really never deviated from. When I think about, all the songs on all the albums are very basic three chord rock and roll songs, it's just that this time I think we went back to the attitude of those other things. "I Hate Myself for Loving You" has that sort of glittery...I don't know if it's a "Touch Me" sound, and "I Love Rock and Roll" sound or both. A lot of it was done very much live in the studio and I think that comes across on the album. It's got a really rough edge but it's very listenable at the same time.

DM: Did you do the horn arrangements?

JJ: Kenny (Laguna) usually does that, he's real good at arranging horns...

DM: Tell me about Desmond Child's role in the studio?

JJ: Desmond was there to give his ideas on the basic feel of the songs. That was basically his and Kenny's thing...

DM: Is there a contrast between their styles in working with you?

JJ: It's probably like night and day. You see, Kenny's like a band member to me, he's the fifth Blackheart. It's like a lot of times if I'm not there to sing the basic tracks, he'll be there singing it, whereas...I don't know, it's just two different kinds of relationships. I don't think of it in terms of everybody doing something specific-it's not like that-it's more like everyone is there in the studio and it just happens.

DM: How did you feel about collaborating with Rick Browde and Desmond Child on the writing of the songs on this album?

JJ: The hardest part is to sit down and feel comfortable with the person you're going to attempt to write with, if that doesn't work then there's no point of even going in the studio. The fact that we all got along so well was really special to me, you know what I mean? I never worked with someone like Desmond, he's a professional songwriter, somebody who just writes hits, and that was really different and something I've never done.

DM: How did your partnership work?

JJ: We met and just sort of hung out while he got the vibe for my thing and I'd play him some riffs and it just sort of came together out of that. The music came out and we just sort of kept it going.

DM: Was the majority of the material written in the studio?

JJ: Yeah, in the rehearsal studio and we'd play it right there so that the band would learn it and then we'd take them right out onto the road. "I Hate Myself" is in the show, "Little Liar," most of the songs were in the show. I think there was maybe one we didn't play live-that's usually the way we like to do it. All of *I Love Rock and Roll* was in the show, it was the set, practically, then we just walked into the studio and recorded it.

DM: How long from start to finish did it take to make this album?

JJ: If you put it all in one thing...three months, but it was spread over a longer period of time-we were doing gigs and stuff in between-but yeah, if you pushed it together, probably three months.



DM: Some of this album was recorded upstate at Bearsville and Woodstock and still more was done at the Hit Factory in New York City, was there a reason for the change in recording venues?

JJ: Well, Desmond works up there so we went up to work on some demos for the songs we had written, "I Hate Myself", "Little Liar", and it turned out that the Demo for "Little Liar" was great, just the sound of it, so we left it alone. The rest of the songs that appear on the album we did at the Hit Factory.

DM: Now, I know you're a big Iggy Pop fan, so "I Want to be Your Dog" seems like an obvious choice, but why did you choose to cover "Tulane"?

JJ: Because it's an obscure Chuck Berry song that nobody really knows. I love to find songs that nobody's ever really heard and Chuck Berry is one of the greatest songwriters, of this era certainly. His lyrics are just so clever, so great. I was in a car accident with him once. We've met several times and this one time we went out to Berry Farm (Chuck Berry's home) out in Missouri. There was some talk about that we were going to have Chuck on Blackheart Records or something, so we went out there and we were hanging out. He let me play his guitar "Maybelline." Wow, you know, things like that are special to me, as a guitar player it's cool. We decided to get something to eat, so we got into his car. I think it was a Cadillac, we got into the car, Kenny was in the back seat and we were driving along, but we were way out...in the middle of nowhere. We're heading to a truck stop and there was a motorcycle in front of us and we're coming to a stop sign. Now Chuck Berry is looking

at me, talking, instead of watching the road and I'm thinking that we're not going to stop in time and sure enough he hit the back of the motorcycle, not real hard, just dented the back of it. The guy gets off the motorcycle and he sees Chuck Berry, and I think this was about the time of "I Love Rock and Roll" and "Crimson and Clover", so my recognition was a little bit high, so he recognized me, too and just starts freaking out that he got hit by Chuck Berry and Joan Jett and forgot all about the dent in his motorcycle. It was just one of those funny stories...

DM: What kind of entity is Blackheart Records? If you were considering signing Chuck Berry, it sounds more like the real thing then just another artist ego stroke...

JJ: I think it is a real thing. I think we are actually going to sign people...

DM: How actively involved do you think you'll be in the actual signing of acts?

JJ: Well, I don't know if it's actually going to get that big. I wouldn't want to be involved in having to sign people and having to say yes and no, it's not my lot in life, I can't do that.

DM: Do you keep track of what's happening on Long Island in the clubs or Long Island bands?

JJ: Not enough. It's really hard because it's not like I get a lot of chances to go out to places and see bands. It's really pretty difficult, but I'm dying to hear some great bands. The last band I can remember getting excited about was the Replacements, I need to hear music like that somewhere.

DM: After all the time you've spent on the road, and the successes you've had, not only in sales but particularly with your film debut in *The Light Of Day* with critics, how do you maintain your hunger for rock and roll?

JJ: It's not a question of how do I maintain the hunger, I mean, the hunger just has me, it's there. You hear everybody say 'Once it's in your blood...' there's nothing more exciting than going out on that stage-to me it's always been imbedded with The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again", that's the song we go onstage to most nights, so if I hear it on the radio I get nervous, I get scared, like "(Shudders) it's time to go on stage now." There's no feeling on earth like that feeling of being out there and playing your songs, 'cause you're not really thinking about anything. You're at your best when you're not thinking at all, when you're not sitting there thinking 'What are the words?', 'What am I going to say?', 'Where should I look?', 'What should I do, should I dance or should I stand still?' I mean, you shouldn't be having any of those thoughts. Your mind should be blank. And when your mind is blank and you're not thinking of anything and you're smiling and you're looking at the audience and they're smiling and yelling...there's no feeling like that in the world. It's the nature of it. I know what it's like, but I have no control over it. I am just naturally into it. I can't help it. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm smitten.

DM: Would you like to see yourself inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame someday?

JJ: Why not, yeah. But I just want to make that big rock and roll book in the sky. That's the thing that's important; To be in the book. When they write the book about classical music, jazz, blues, and rock and roll I want to be in that book that says you did something important for music, whether it be opening the doors for women or just keeping the torch of basic rock and roll alive, I want it to say that I made a contribution in some way for the betterment of rock and roll music.